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BALTIMORE SUN
11 March 1986

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1A

'Contra' plan would release secret funds

Aid request includes freeing of CIA money

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WASHINGTON — Congressional approval of President Reagan's request for aid to the Nicaraguan insurgents would permit the administration to use a vast secret intelligence fund, on top of the $100 million the president has formally proposed to spend, the House Intelligence Committee has been told.

Committee sources disclosed yesterday that a high administration official had testified in a closed session that the aid request was intended to remove restrictions on the use of CIA contingency funds against the pro-Soviet government of Nicaragua.

The administration official was summoned to clarify an ambiguously worded section of an appendix to the proposal that had caught the attention of congressional staff members, the sources said.

A State Department official said the request, if approved, would remove the special restrictions on CIA activity in Nicaragua. He said it would mean that "Congress would have the same kind of oversight over intelligence operations in Nicaragua as over similar operations anywhere else in the world."

Representative Michael D. Barnes, D-Md.-8th, said the revelation about administration intentions meant "the president is asking for a blank check." Mr. Barnes, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs, has been a critic of the administration's aid proposal.

The size of the CIA's contingency fund is an official secret. One congressional staff member said it had been authoritatively described to him as "a bottomless pit." Another said it was "several times as large" as the formal aid request of $100 million.

Representative Edward P. Boland, D-Mass., former chairman of the Intelligence Committee, said, "I think we have to understand clearly what we're being asked to approve. It's not just $100 million for the 'contras.'

"If we approve the resolution, we make available other funds in the intelligence budget, specifically those in the CIA's reserve for contingencies. We also remove all current legal restrictions on CIA and DOD [Department of Defense] assistance to the contras."

Mr. Boland is the author of the first legislative prohibition against U.S. covert action aimed at overthrowing the Sandinista government. His name also has been attached to congressional restrictions on the use of U.S. funds for arming the Nicaraguan rebels.

Without the secret funds, the president was asking Congress to appropriate $100 million for the contras over the next 18 months — $70 million in military aid and $30 million in non-lethal supplies. The contras are now receiving the last segment of a $27 million appropriation whose use was restricted by Congress to non-lethal aid.

Even before yesterday's disclosure about the CIA fund, the new aid measure was considered unlikely to pass when the House votes on it March 19.

"I think this is a strong reason to oppose the bill," said Mr. Barnes, who will manage part of the floor debate in the House. "Even if a member of Congress favors aid to the contras, he should know how much aid he is approving. I doubt the Congress is going to want to approve this."

Under rules adopted for consideration of the request, Congress is required to vote yes or no on it. It cannot be amended.

Congressional sources said staff members were first struck by what they called the "lawyer's language" of a paragraph in the administration proposal that said the approval of the resolution by Congress would "be deemed to satisfy" the terms of Section 105A of the Intelligence Authorization Act of 1986. Section 105A sets restrictions on the use of U.S. funds for the contras.

Mr. Barnes said he had sought clarifications from Elliott Abrams, the assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs. But Mr. Abrams, in a public session of the Western Hemisphere subcommittee, had claimed ignorance. The House Intelligence Committee was more successful in closed session with an administration offical whose identity was being kept secret under committee rules.

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